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CWD Audit Synopsis

Michigan Department of Natural Resources
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Introduction

Chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a contagious neurological disease that affects deer and elk. It causes a characteristic spongy degeneration of the brains of infected animals resulting in emaciation, abnormal behavior, loss of bodily functions and death. The exact form of transmission is not known. CWD has appeared in Wisconsin, making it a threat to Michigan's deer and elk populations. CWD has been discovered in free-ranging cervids in Colorado, Illinois, New Mexico, Nebraska, South Dakota, Utah, Wisconsin, Wyoming, and the Canadian province of Saskatchewan. The disease has also been diagnosed in captive cervids in Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, Minnesota, Montana, Oklahoma, Kansas and the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta.

In 2003, Governor Jennifer M. Granholm signed an executive order to create the CWD Task Force, which addressed concerns in the natural resources community that the deadly disease poses a threat to Michigan white-tailed deer and elk. The task force was chaired by former Michigan Department of Natural Resources Director Howard Tanner, and William W. Taylor, chair of the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University, served as vice-chair.

After completing a series of public hearings, the task force issued recommendations to Governor Granholm. Among them was the call for a complete audit of the captive deer and elk industry in Michigan. This audit was undertaken by the DNR Law Enforcement and Wildlife Divisions in 2004.

What DNR Did

Between June and October 2004, DNR audited 584 captive/private owned cervid facilities. Of those, 506 were active operations. Auditors collected data on a number of factors, including number and types of cervid held; the places from which they were obtained; how they were identified; the types, heights and conditions of fences; and information about CWD testing and escapes.

During the period of the audit, audited facilities housed a total of 32,493 captive/private owned cervid. More than 30,000 of those animals were of species known or anticipated to be susceptible to CWD. The vast majority (25,976 or 84.4%) were white-tailed deer. Elk were the second most abundant at 4,029 animals (13.2%), and 611 (2%) were red deer.

There are 740 captive/private owned cervid facilities in the state, ranging from one acre in size to more than 5,000 acres. Facilities audited are classified into four categories: hobby, exhibition, ranch and full registration.

What DNR Found

Overall, auditors determined that 37% of all captive/private owned cervid facilities were not in compliance with current regulations at the time of the audit. The principal areas of deficiency related to the identification of animals, the rate of CWD testing, conditions of fencing, and the rate and reporting of escaped animals.

Other findings include:

- There is no system of mandatory, uniform animal identification for captive/private owned cervid that provides unique and visible identification of each individual by which the animal can be traced throughout its lifetime.
- There is a general lack of CWD testing of Michigan captive/private owned cervid, despite a mandatory testing program for all captive/private owned cervid over the age of 16 months that die. This means that DNR cannot rule out the possibility that the disease is already here and currently propagating undetected.
- There is a lack of regulations regarding the decommissioning or de-registering of captive cervid facilities. This often frustrates owners, who may deal with the situation in the worst possible way -- releasing their captive animals into the free-ranging population.
- Procedures to deal with facility abandonment are conspicuously absent and critically needed.
- The current record-keeping by facilities, while meeting current regulations, is inadequate in order to minimize disease risk. More modern, up-to-date record-keeping methods are needed.
- It was clear to auditors that escapes of captive cervid occur, but are rarely properly reported. Owners reported 464 animals escaped over a four-year period, however, only eight of those were properly reported to the Michigan Department of Agriculture.
- There is a lack of uniform regulation for the composition and maintenance of perimeter fencing of captive cervid facilities.
- Ranch facilities enclose the largest number of CWD-susceptible captive/private owned cervid, import the largest number of animals from out-of-state sources, had the largest percentage of animals lacking identification, had the lowest rate of CWD testing, and the lowest rate of recovery and identification of escapees. In addition, ranch facilities are located in areas with some of the highest free-ranging white-tailed deer densities in the state.
- There needs to be more research and development of regulation for the disposal of manure and carcasses from captive cervid facilities.

To read the full CWD audit report, visit www.michigan.gov/dnr and click on CWD Audit.